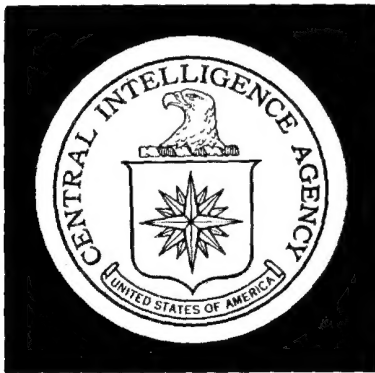


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DIRECTORATE OF
INTELLIGENCE

Intelligence Memorandum

*Disposition and Strength
of Communist Combat Units in South Laos,
Southern North Vietnam, and South Vietnam's
Military Region 1*

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3 February 1971

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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY
Directorate of Intelligence
3 February 1971

INTELLIGENCE MEMORANDUM

Disposition and Strength of Communist Combat
Units in South Laos, Southern North Vietnam
and South Vietnam's Military Region 1.

INTRODUCTION

This memorandum describes the current disposition and strengths of Communist ground combat units in the immediate environs of Tchepone and the adjacent areas of the Lao Panhandle, southern North Vietnam, and South Vietnam's Military Region 1 from which the enemy could reinforce the Tchepone area. The time required to deploy troops to the Tchepone area could vary from several days to as much as a month depending on a unit's place of departure, its combat readiness, the availability of trucks, the amount of disruption from bombing, and the weather. However, given optimum conditions, it is believed that most of the units discussed could be redeployed within a week. Obviously, many of the NVA units could not be used to reinforce the Tchepone area because of the Communist need to maintain a viable military posture elsewhere. Given the limited data available on the location and strength of enemy units, many of the locations ascribed to specific units are approximate and the strengths assigned to most units are orders of magnitude only.

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BACKGROUND

1. The Tchepone area in Savannakhet Province is the hub of the Communist logistical supply system in the upper Panhandle of Laos. Logistic units in this area receive supplies from North Vietnam via several entry routes -- the Mu Gia Pass about 100 miles to the north, Ban Karai Pass 65 miles to the north, and the western DMZ corridor about 35 miles to the northeast. The general Tchepone area, which bears the Allied designator of Base Area 604, is also the operating location of an important NVA command center. [REDACTED]

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SOUTH LAOS

2. Within south Laos* there are an estimated 28,000 combat troops -- about 22,000 NVA (including advisors and fillers) and more than 6,000 PL* [REDACTED] About 11,000 of the NVA combat troops are located within the environs of Tchepone. [REDACTED]

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3. Distance factors would not prevent the assembly in the Tchepone area of some considerable proportion of the remaining 11,000 combat troops located elsewhere in southern Laos within a week or so. The large concentrations of NVA forces in the adjoining provinces of Saravane and Khammouane could probably make the move in a few days [REDACTED]

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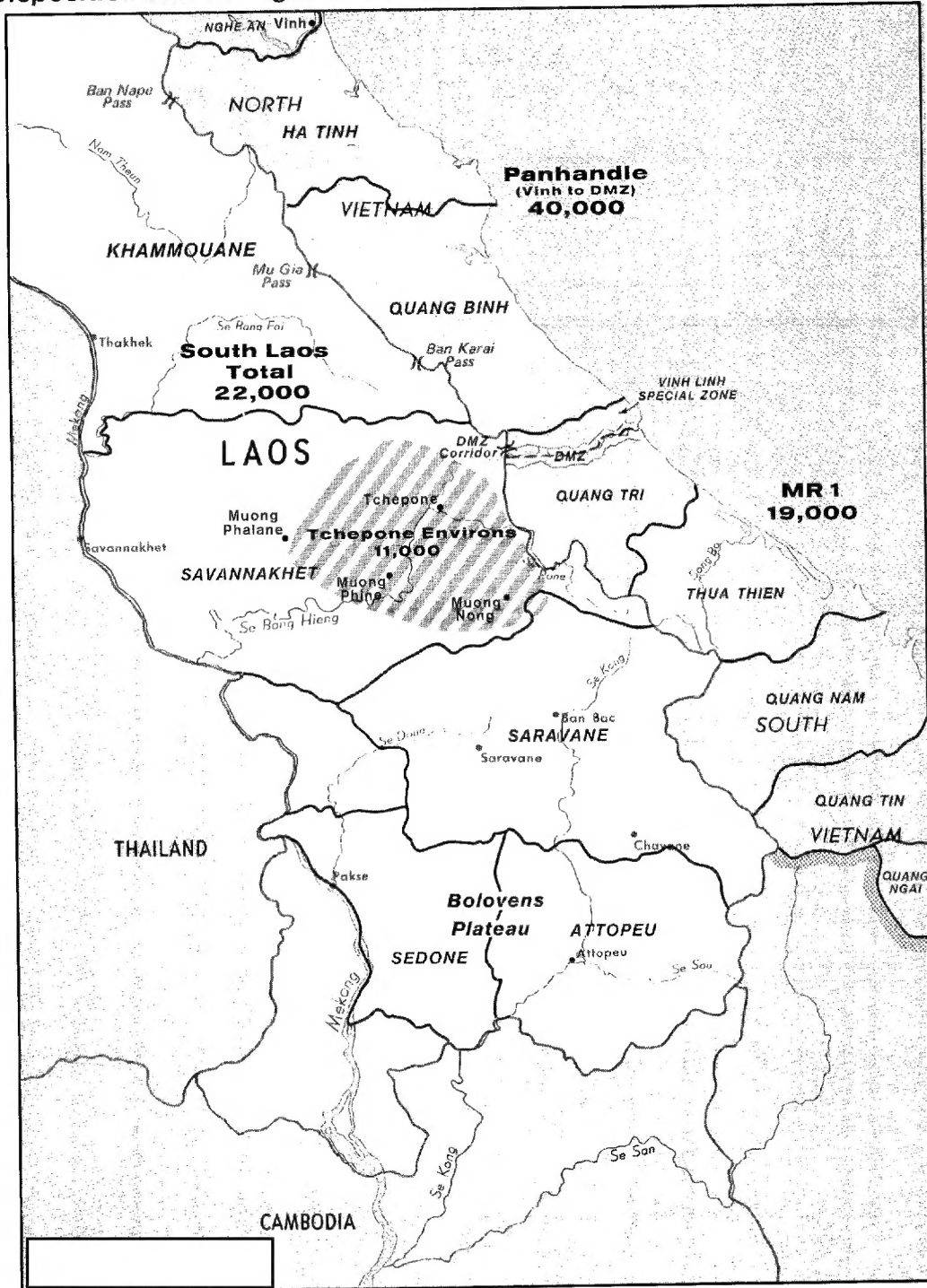
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*Includes the area from the northern border of Khammouane Province south to the Lao-Cambodian border.

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[REDACTED]

Disposition and Strength of Communist Combat Forces – 1 February 1971



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4. As yet, however, we have seen no evidence of any such movement despite the evident Communist concern over an attack toward Tchepone by the ARVN. It may be that they are constrained by the threat posed by friendly guerrilla units operating in South Laos. Any large-scale deployment of NVA forces out of an area in which such forces are currently operating seems unlikely.

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5. It seems unlikely at this time that the Communist would willingly reduce their pressures on the Bolovens Plateau or leave the rest of South Laos vulnerable to friendly assault. We cannot predict with any accuracy the extent to which Hanoi would be willing to redeploy these forces. But barring the prospects of a calamitous defeat in the Tchepone area we would judge that Hanoi would tend to draw its reinforcements from North Vietnam or Military Region I in South Vietnam.

NORTH VIETNAM

6. There are nearly 40,000 NVA combat forces located between Vinh and the DMZ. [REDACTED] The Vinh cut-off is somewhat arbitrary. It was chosen because of the large number of NVA forces south of Vinh, [REDACTED] It is from this area that Hanoi would be most likely to reinforce its forces in Laos if the need arose. There are currently 3 NVA Infantry Divisions [REDACTED] located within this area, and elements of all three have had combat experience against Allied forces. In addition to these units, there are a number of independent NVA infantry and artillery regiments in the area, which also have had some experience against Allied forces and which could be used for reinforcement.

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8. Despite the fact that there is a relatively large pool of units in North Vietnam which Hanoi could draw upon, Hanoi clearly does not have an unlimited capability to reinforce the Tchepone area. This has become particularly evident in recent weeks with North Vietnam's increasing concern about the possibility of Allied incursions into the homeland.

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9. The size of the commitment Hanoi is willing to make cannot be quantified with high assurance. Hanoi is obviously determined to fight and to make things as difficult as possible for the South Vietnamese. Hanoi could, for example, decide to send some troops directly across the DMZ in a flanking maneuver against the forces deployed along Route 9. But assuming a decision to reinforce Tchepone, we would estimate, given the large number of forces currently deployed north of the DMZ, that a reinforcement of as much as a division

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equivalent -- some 10,000 men -- could be made without seriously impairing North Vietnam's defensive capabilities. Whether Hanoi would be willing to raise the ante even further depends on a number of considerations. Foremost among these are Hanoi's view of the urgency of keeping the Laotian supply route operative and its readings of US intentions north of the DMZ.

SOUTH VIETNAM

25X1 10. Within the physical borders of South Vietnam's Military Region (MR) 1, there are nearly 19,000 NVA and VC combat troops. [REDACTED] This figure excludes several thousand troops in independent companies and platoons, who are assumed to be unavailable for reinforcement principally because of their essentially defensive role and their relative lack of combat readiness. While the Communists in MR 1 have the capability to reinforce the Tchepone area with additional forces, they already have dispatched some 6,000 during roughly the last half of 1970. If they are to maintain any kind of a military posture in MR 1 against the Government of Vietnam's pacification efforts, it seems unlikely that they would draw down much further on their force levels and we see no indication as yet that they intend to do so.

25X1 11. We have not allowed for the possibility of any reinforcement from MR 2 to the Tchepone Area. [REDACTED]

25X1 [REDACTED] Because of this and the time factor involved in deploying MR 2 forces up to the Tchepone area and considering the large number of the forces more readily available, any further drawdown on the remaining relatively small MR 2 force levels seems most unlikely at this time.

SUMMARY

12. The current deployment of enemy forces in the immediate Tchepone area and the adjacent areas of the Laos Panhandle, southern North Vietnam, and GVN MR 1 is given below:

Strength and Disposition of Combat Forces

Tchepone areas	Total	11,000
Adjacent areas	Total	<u>70,000</u>
South Laos (outside Tchepone areas)	11,000	
Southern North Vietnam	40,000	
GVN MR 1	19,000	

If Hanoi is to maintain a viable military presence in Military Region I and ensure adequate security for its logistics system in south Laos, few of the troops in these areas could be used to reinforce the Tchepone area. Thus, the major burden of reinforcement would seem to fall on the 40,000 combat forces deployed in southern North Vietnam. Given the strength of these forces, probably the equivalent of a division, or 10,000 men could be quickly redeployed without seriously weakening North Vietnam's defensive capabilities. Whether Hanoi would be willing to commit additional forces depends on whether it sees itself capable of maintaining a viable supply system in Laos and its reading of the likelihood of Allied ground incursions into North Vietnam.

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